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Register competence in academic writing of student teachers specialising in English didactics at the University of Venda

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Abstract: The adept utilisation of appropriate language registers is fundamental for proficient academic writing among students who study English as a secondary language within educational institutions such as schools, colleges, and universities. This investigation stems from a comprehensive study that sought to evaluate the register proficiency of a select group of student teachers who, for various reasons, encountered challenges in employing suitable language registers. The primary objective of this scholarly article is to scrutinise the application of apt academic registers among a specific cohort of third-year English students at a rural university. This cohort comprised 15 trainee educators specialising in English didactics. The research adopted a case study design, focusing on the qualitative method, with data analysis conducted through thematic analysis. The outcomes of this study illuminated that a deficiency in register comprehension and application could impede the academic writing endeavours of the selected third-year teacher training students. However, it also highlighted the potential for improvement, as the students' compositions demonstrated instances of passive voice, absence of parallel structure, and utilisation of colloquial language, slang, personal pronouns, and phrasal verbs—styles generally deemed unsuitable for academic writing. This study underscores the significance of meticulous attention to register employment to ensure that students have attained mastery over the appropriate writing style and its correct usage in academic contexts. It also suggests that with targeted interventions, such as the integration of an Artificial Intelligence pedagogical approach, these students can improve their register proficiency, providing a clear path for their future academic writing competence.

Introduction

This article delves into the assessment of proficiency in academic writing styles among student educators studying English as a second language at a rural university. According to Conrad (2019), the term register encompasses two concepts; broadly, as a linguistic variety associated with situational parameters such as addresses, settings, communication modes, tasks, or topics, and more specifically, as the vocabulary utilised by distinct occupational groups or in specific situations (Delang 2022). The narrower definition of the concept seems inadequate. As previously suggested and will be further emphasised, register analysis should encompass more than vocabulary (AI). It should also consider other aspects of language. Gravetter and Forzano (2011) emphasize a different aspect of registers, referring to them as 'sets of language items associated with discrete occupational or social groups.' Moreover, it is certainly true that several studies have focused on the registers employed by specific groups such as sports announcers, students, researchers, or even parents speaking baby talk (Halliday and Hasan 1976). Nevertheless, the concept is closely associated with situations of use rather than with specific groups of individuals, which is why Lee's (2007) definition is quite complex to accept.

In the context of this study, we adopt Conrad (2019), who professes that register variations about when and how they are differently used for different situations, purposes, and audiences, which are fundamental to students in English as a second language and even in the worldwide English standards. The register is embedded in all forms and types of communication, with discrete varieties of language used, the activities performed, the participants and their roles in communication, the

medium of communication, and the interconnectivity between one form of language and another. We see this as a topic of pivotal significance in the context of English as a second language. More attention must be paid to this area because register variation has been observed as a common challenge among tertiary students.

Although the use of the terms 'register', 'styles', and 'genre' varies from scholar to scholar, some studies have shown that the issue of 'register-style' exists in Chinese (Halliday and Hasan 1976). Siddiqui et al. (2023) and Alamri and Al-Tunisi (2019) analysed several styles of Chinese adopted by news reporters, law practitioners, advertisers, government officials, academics, artists, etc. Akhtar and Riaz (2019) noticed that scholars in Chinese linguistics tend to use different styles (風格 *fenge* in her words) of Chinese in different physical and social contexts. Hashemi and Amerian (2011) state that register plays a role in CSL pedagogical grammar. This problem appears to be a focal point in the linguistic community.

In the same vein, the results of a retrospective study by Sibomana et al. (2019) show that there are challenges in teaching and learning English as a second language (ESL) worldwide, especially at universities. Some of the pioneering work was undertaken in the early 2000s in the United Kingdom (UK) by Sadiq and Khanam (2022), elucidated that the relationship between reading and writing reports that literacy standards in schools and universities are very low and that academics often complain that students cannot write after the rules of academic requirements. This extends to register usage in relation to formal writing based on the features of deviance and the aspects of language variation. The ability to take what is possibly a complex idea and put it into simple terms that can help in the understanding of the concept is required here. The work in this area was heavily influenced by Delang (2022), who expounded that poor grammar is a problem in higher education, where many students are unable to construct proper sentences and paragraphs.

Similarly, studies conducted in Ghanaian universities indicated some of the following as grammatical and lexical errors that university students make in their L2 writings: wrong register usage, which entails concord errors, wrong tense, wrong word use, wrong collocation, ambiguity, punctuation errors and wrong idiomatic expression use (Mogadid 2021). Maswanganyi et al. (2023) further indicated that students do not acquire abstract syntactic structures from the beginning of their language development, and this compromises their linguistic competencies.

Consequently, students' difficulties with academic language may be related to inexperience with the linguistic demands of the tasks at institutions of high learning and teaching (Bodunde and Sotiloye, 2013). In the same vein, the media report similar concerns: 'In South Africa, too, there are growing concerns about the high levels of poor student writing in schools and higher education' (News24 30/06/2019 The media reports show that students entering higher education struggle to write effectively and are therefore underprepared for studies in institutions of higher learning (Kgalema Motlanthe 22/04/2010; News24 30/06/2019). This is further supported by the study conducted by Conrad (2019), who reported similar observations that first-level university students encounter academic writing challenges when transitioning to higher education, which encompasses the wrong use of prepositions, contractions, and double negation in their writing pieces.

The most influential work in the area is by Sadiq and Khanam (2022), who pinpointed that student writing poses challenges in the English second language context across the globe, and the major weaknesses are attributed to poor proficiency arising from poor sentence skills, grammatical inaccuracies, and imperfect academic writing skills. Moreover, third year education students studying English are on the verge of being launched into society to serve as teachers with English as a major, but their written work seems not to provide evidence of language proficiency. This has raised some concerns in rural universities. This effect has widely been reported in the literature and there have been multiple previous attempts to solve the inappropriate use of registers.

Contrastingly, this still causes some confusion in research communities since researchers are faced with the question of when and how to prevent the use of unsuitable registers in all sociolinguistic functions. This has been a controversial point that has been widely discussed in the literature we consulted (Hashemi and American 2011). Moreover, it has been a focus of research for more than a decade to explore the factors affecting the writing skills among university and college students. However, the literature has not reported register usage in different situations.

The register can be considered one of the most difficult and complex skills to master. University students are expected to have perfected their writing skills, including choosing proper registers for formal writing. This is an academic setting where students are expected to write in an appropriate language and adopt an attitude that presents them as experts. This is a growing and competitive area of research, and it has been a topic of interest for nearly half a century. The studies conducted by several researchers suggest the use of effective feedback in academic writing pedagogy. In this instance, Alamri and Al-Tunisi (2019) and Abkar et al. (2021) maintain that students should be shown their weaknesses and strengths so that they can improve on their future work. Subsequently, some academics think feedback does not work as students are only concerned about the grades they receive from their assignments. In the same vein, Delang (2022) suggests the following solutions to teaching and responding to academic writing, namely teacher education where teachers are trained to respond to student writing effectively, adequate exchange of information by writers (students) and readers (lecturers) and teachers should teach writing as a process.

Mouri (2016) elucidated that some students struggle to cope with institutional literacy expectations because the medium of instruction is English, which is not necessarily the native language of many students. Nonetheless, these students are expected to think and write using standard literacy practices. Sanchez et al. (2023) articulate that lecturers complained about large class sizes, while students blamed the lack of lecturer attention on their academic writing.

Moreover, due to globalisation, the English language has gained immense worldwide recognition. Most students at higher learning institutions and teaching use English in all forms of communication. Given these concerns about the English proficiency of many second language students of English, we examined register competence in academic writing of third-year English student teachers at the University of Venda.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore register competence among third-year English students in academic writing at the University of Venda. Several analytical procedures were used to analyse the data, namely

- Identifying the use of registers. A detailed analysis of the output did this;
- Analysing and classifying sociolinguistic factors that could be hindering the appropriate use of registers found in students' essays; and
- Establishing a frequency count of inappropriate register use.

Research questions

Moreover, this study sought to answer the following research questions so that research accomplishes its designated objectives:

- What are the variations of the English register used in academic writing by the third-year students studying English at the University of Venda?
- Which sociolinguistic factors could be hindering the appropriate use of registers in academic writing among students at the University of Venda?; and
- What strategies could be employed to enhance students' use of register in academic writing?

Literature review

The concept of register in linguistics

As posited by scholars Halliday and Hasan (1976), the concept of linguistic register holds a pivotal role in shaping both written and spoken discourses, augmented with an added layer of meaning. A proficient understanding of the register in language, both written and spoken, is paramount to providing suitable responses. The primary linguistic registers encompass frozen, formal, consultative, casual, and intimate.

Holmes (2011) argues that the term 'register' can be interpreted in two ways. In a broader sense, it denotes a language variety associated with situational parameters such as addresses, settings, communication modes, tasks, or topics. Some researchers apply the term to refer to the specific

vocabulary used by different professional groups in specific contexts. However, the narrower interpretation of the concept appears inadequate, as register analysis should not be confined to vocabulary alone.

Types of register

Some linguists posit that there are two primary registers within language: namely, formal and informal. While not entirely inaccurate, this classification represents an oversimplification. The prevailing viewpoint among language researchers is the recognition of five distinct registers, a position consistent with the elucidation by Halliday and Hasan (1976), which currently represents the consensus regarding the presence of five distinct registers within the English language.

Frozen

This form is often referred to as the static register because it is associated with historical language or communication intended to remain unaltered, similar to constitutional provisions or religious invocations. Notable examples include The Bible, the United States Constitution, the Bhagavad Gita, and Romeo and Juliet (Holmes 2011).

Formal

The formal register is employed in professional, academic, or legal settings where communication is expected to be respectful, uninterrupted, and restrained. It is less rigid but still bound by conventions. Slang is never used, and contractions are rare in this form of communication. Examples of the formal register include a TED talk, a business presentation, the Encyclopaedia Britannica, and 'Gray's Anatomy' by Henry Gray (Babalola 2007).

Consultative

People often use this register in conversations when they are speaking with someone who has specialised knowledge or who offers advice. The tone is often respectful (using courtesy titles) but may be more casual if the relationship is longstanding or friendly (a family doctor.) Slang is sometimes used and people may pause or interrupt one another. Examples include TV news broadcasts, annual physicals, and service providers like plumbers (Conrad 2019).

Casual

This type of communication is commonly used in social settings, such as interactions with friends, family, co-workers, and close acquaintances. It is characterised using casual language, contractions, and informal grammar. Individuals may also use expletives or informal expressions in specific settings, such as informal social events or birthday parties. According to Hashemi and American (2011), communication on social media platforms often takes on a laid-back and casual tone, allowing for more relaxed and unreserved interaction.

Intimate

Linguists agree that intimate language is usually reserved for special occasions and is often used between only two people in private. It can be something as simple as an inside joke between friends or a word whispered in a lover's ear. According to Akinyeye (2015), there are two perspectives on this type of language: the broad perspective, which sees it as a social genre of linguistic usage, and the narrow perspective, which equates it with intimacy (Al Hamdany 2015).

The style in register usage

Based on Conrad's work in 2019, the term 'style' primarily pertains to written text and denotes how the text is crafted to serve a specific purpose. Style encompasses vocabulary selection, tone, grammar usage, sentence structure, and formatting, all of which vary depending on the intended purpose of the text. There are four primary writing styles: narrative, persuasive, descriptive, and expository. This style is moderately influenced by register choice.

Misuse of homonyms

Zitha (2023) pinpointed that one of the major issues in language is the difficulty in distinguishing between words that sound the same but have different meanings, spellings, and usage. These words are called homonyms and can easily be confused in writing. As a result, the reader may fail to grasp the intended idea. Commonly misused homonyms include here vs. hear, hole vs. whole, its vs. it's, know vs. no, and knew vs. new.

Easily confused words

The similarity among certain English words appears to be a matter of close attention, as speakers and writers often fail to consider this when using the language in all contexts (Sibomana et al, 2019). In addition to homonyms, some words are similar in spelling, sound, and meaning and are, therefore, frequently confused (Ebotagbo and Anyang, 2024). Examples of such words include accept – except, affect – effect, loose – lose, quite – quit – quiet, then – than, which may not be identified by a computer spell checker. Hence, it is crucial to carefully proofread one's essay to ensure the correct words are used. Furthermore, second language and additional-language students commonly struggle with the use of homonyms and homophones in their written work (Sadiq and Khanam, 2022).

Wrong word forms

Conrad (2019) expounded on the colonial register that vocabulary tends to be tricky and challenging based on the comprehension of word forms and their rightful use on different occasions. Moreover, when one writes quickly, one can also make a mistake in writing a word form that is different from what one is going to write (Zitha 2023). This is especially true about parts of speech references. For example, writing a verb instead of an adjective is a common mistake, which can considerably change the meaning (e.g. *disable people* instead of *disabled people*). The words are mostly misused due to confusion about each lexical category's meaning in spoken or written communication (Nghikembua 2013).

Non-standard vocabulary

Bodunde and Sotiloye (2013) explain that vocabulary is dynamic and complex in its use, encompassing a variety of languages and tones. Therefore, standardising language is essential when considering vocabulary. The use of vocabulary in the context of a second language may be less carefully chosen based on the occasion, purpose of communication, and its channel. Additionally, Mouri (2016) points out that the use of non-standard words such as *wanna*, *gonna*, and *kinda* blurs the line between a stylistic and a vocabulary error. While these words are generally understood in academic writing, they create a negative impression and should be avoided.

Passive voice constructions

Passive voice is a grammatical construction in which a head noun functions as the subject of a sentence, clause, or verb that is affected by the action of the verb or being acted upon by the verb (Mwakapina 2016; Abkar et al. 2021). As a result, the noun functions as the grammatical subject and typically represents the recipient of the action denoted by the verb rather than the agent. In another study, Mogadid (2021) notes that in the passive voice, the object of active verbs becomes the subject of the passive verb. In the active voice, the subject is the doer, while in the passive voice, the subject receives the action. Furthermore, only transitive verbs are used in the passive voice. When an active voice sentence in any tense is converted into a passive voice sentence, the object of the active voice sentence becomes the subject, and the verb should be used in the past participle form. However, many learners encounter difficulties in learning the passive voice. Siddiqui et al. (2023) elucidate that in learning the passive voice, a few problems occur due to the misformation of a passive verb, active order but passive form, absent or wrong positions before the agent, and passive order but active form. Teaching passive voice to ESL/EFL learners has been a challenge for teachers. According to Delang (2022), many ESL/EFL teachers have observed that teaching the passive voice's meaning, uses, and functions is a significant problem in L2 grammar instruction, and most L1 speakers struggle with passive constructions.

While numerous studies have examined challenges in academic literacy, the issue of inappropriate language registers remains unresolved, and there has been no exploration of this area from interactionist and variationist sociolinguistic perspectives. In retrospective studies, students have attributed the low quality of academic writing at higher learning institutions to lecturers' apparent obsession with plagiarism (Conrad 2019). Mogadid (2021) emphasized that universities in South Africa recognise the importance of academic development courses in developing writing skills, but they do not give them the prestige and value they deserve. Additionally, a significant limitation in this field of study is the insufficient understanding of sociolinguistic features, resulting in inappropriate language variations in certain contexts. However, this research provides new insights into this area. There is limited literature on this issue, and very little effort has been made to tackle this problem. The status, functions, and characteristics of English in specific regions of the developing world appear to be similar to those in South Africa. This study aimed to bring attention to and rectify these misunderstandings and errors in language variations.

Conceptual framework

This study was underpinned by a register theory developed by Halliday, a pioneering linguist who focused on the concept of 'register' in the 1960s and 1970s. He defines 'register' as a semantic concept, representing a configuration of meanings associated with specific situational characteristics of the field, mode, and tenor (Halliday and Hasan, 1976, p. 103). The linguistic features and values of the field, mode, and tenor dimensions shape the functional variety of a language (Halliday 1994). Register theory emphasizes how linguistic choices contribute to the understanding that language use in spoken context differs significantly from written discourse. The approach taken in this work involves a dynamic exploration of register variation and style in academic writing. It is grounded in register theory and academic literacy approaches as its theoretical framework. Through a comprehensive analysis of registers, individuals can gain insight into the contextual factors that influence register choices in different situations. The primary emphasis is placed on the precision and suitability of English register usage in formal communication. The register is the theory of language variation according to situational contexts, and its focus is the systematic relation between a situation context and the language variety to be used. In relation to the types of register, this theory enables one to comprehend the register for scholarly writing because of the three parameters, tenor, mode, and field, and the guidelines that enable writers to use the appropriate register in any context. In addition, these three parameters can be used to specify the context of the situation in which language is being used.

This theory aids students in using a suitable register in the formal setting, as it highlights the differences between language types, such as technical, formal, and everyday language. Academic literacy theory exposes many dimensions of student academic writing to be brought to the fore, including the impact of student writing, academic writing as an ideologically inscribed construction of knowledge, and the nature of generic, academic, and discipline-specific writing practices. The perceptions and experiences of students writing in ESL contexts matter. As such, the insights can contribute to a better understanding of why students continue to struggle with their writing and can inform lecturers at institutions of higher learning of effective ways of developing and improving students' writing competencies.

Methodology

This study used a rigorous qualitative method to gain profound insights and nuanced comprehension of the use of language registers in communication. This meticulous approach is rooted in the principles of qualitative research, which entails the meticulous gathering and interpretation of non-numerical data to gain a deep understanding of the human and social environment (Gravetter and Forzano 2011).

Leveraging the qualitative research method enabled the comprehensive representation and analysis of semantic content using registers, thus yielding valuable descriptive data and articulating key parameters and factors linked to sociolinguistic influences and the misapplication of language registers.

The decision to employ a case study design was purposeful, as the nature of the data comprised linguistic forms, including words, phrases, or sentences rather than numerical figures. This approach

was chosen to authentically observe the subject within a natural setting and provide the opportunity to analyse the cause and effect of the identified deviant features. The study targeted a group of 120 third-year university students specialising in language practice, media studies, and education, selected due to their status as student educators undergoing English language teaching. However, for the study, a specific subset of 15 student educators engaged in English language learning was purposefully chosen as participants. The data for our study was gathered using interviews and English essay scripts that the students themselves had written. We used semi-structured questions and student essays as our primary tools to collect data effectively. Through narrative inquiry, we were able to gather valuable insights into the students' knowledge of language registers, obtaining detailed information with minimal conscious effort. Our research focused on analysing how third-year English students at the University of Venda in Limpopo province used language registers.

The essays were carefully read and analysed to assess the students' proficiency with the register. They were then categorised and described in narrative form, along with an analysis of the students' use of registers. The data collected were analysed based on the research questions posed in this study, addressing the research objectives both qualitatively and quantitatively. Statistical responses from interview questions and the different types of registers used in the students' essay scripts were presented. The researchers reviewed both the essay scripts and interview questions. Fifteen students participated in the study, each writing an essay on provided topics. Their essay scripts were further analysed and categorised using the SPSS tool to identify the register used and the sociolinguistic factors that influenced this usage. The interviews aimed to gather data on the respondents' biographical details and their understanding of register usage, including the features contained in each register type.

Findings and discussion

A group of fifteen male and female student educators were carefully chosen to participate in this research project at a rural university in Limpopo province. These students were selected to ensure representation from both urban and rural areas. To conduct the study, a comprehensive set of interview questions (e.g. 'What is your understanding of register usage and style in the English language?', 'How do you think the concept of a register is taught in your curriculum?') and a diverse list of essay topics (e.g. 'Discuss the use of formal and informal registers in a classroom setting', 'Compare and contrast the use of registers in academic and casual conversations') were distributed to third-year English student educators for their thoughtful responses and consideration, respectively.

Analysis of student educator's responses

The research findings definitively highlight students' inadequate knowledge of register usage and style. The participants unequivocally expressed their lack of competence in utilising registers across various contexts, attributing this deficiency to the absence of comprehensive instruction at all levels of their tertiary education.

Student's knowledge of register

Upon review of the students' responses, it is evident that an understanding of two primary types of registers, formal and informal, was demonstrated. Specifically, seven students were found to be familiar with only two types of registers, while five students exhibited comprehensive knowledge of three register types. However, three students showed a lack of comprehension of register categories and their underlying elements, and the rest demonstrated a lack of understanding regarding registers. Remarkably, the students noted that they had not been exposed to other register types throughout their four years of study.

The findings suggest a lack of emphasis on the concept of register in the English language curriculum, as participants were entirely unaware of the distinctive features that define different styles. Consequently, there is a compelling need for the inclusion of this aspect in the curriculum to improve students' understanding of the register and its significance in mastering language rules. This is crucial for their future roles as educators and communicators in diverse settings.

Inspection of appropriate register usage in different situations

The students were unsure about the criteria and features to consider when using registers in spoken and written communication. They found it difficult to distinguish between features of spoken and written discourses and to use registers appropriately due to inadequate knowledge. Four students indicated that inspecting the appropriate use of registers was quite tricky because of their lack of knowledge. Six students were familiar with some features that distinguished formal and informal variations of the register, while five students were unable to detect deviant features of register use on different occasions. Correctness and appropriateness were highlighted as issues because students needed to use language correctly in terms of the grammatical rules. Hasan and Halliday emphasize the importance of employing the appropriate register based on the audience, purpose, and topic, stressing the necessity of utilising a suitable register to align with the specific context.

Avoidance of spoken language features in academic writing

The use of registers could be optimised by enhancing students' comprehension of the diverse register types and their respective applicability. It is crucial to recognise that spoken and written language transcends a simple dichotomy, encompassing a more nuanced spectrum.

Several students possess the capacity to evade specific features, while others encounter challenges due to inadequate mastery of the register. Three students encountered difficulty in discerning between spoken and written language, perceiving it to have a detrimental impact on their language competence. Moreover, seven students identified contractions, passive voice, and phrasal verbs as atypical features. These elements are integral to English and are commonly employed in formal written communication. These findings align with Siddiqui et al. (2023), who posits that the proficient application of the register is often disregarded, as students lack familiarity with its essential aspects, which are scarcely addressed beyond a superficial level in the curriculum.

Moreover, in line with observations, their variation in the use of language results in the wrong usage of the language. Nonetheless, the spoken language features are not realised in the written language and are considered appropriate usage because of the dominant use of certain words on some occasions. The realisation of deviant features is in line with the register theory in relation to the scale of formality, which reveals the different uses of each register type.

Thematic analysis of data

We provided essay topics for the students to choose from for their essays, and 15 students wrote essays on their selected topics. We collected and analysed the data from each student to assess their proficiency in written discourse. The outcome of the identification can be depicted in Table 1.

The data presented in Table 2 highlights the irregularities in register usage by showing the percentage of each feature category. The analysis revealed common confusion between register types and features in both spoken and written communication. Additionally, non-native speakers tend to intertwine formal and informal registers on various occasions.

Figure 1 delineates five types of registers: formal, informal, consultative, static, and intimate. Formal and informal registers are prevalent in academic and professional writing, exhibiting similarities and distinctive features. Notably, students overlooked the informal register's features in formal writing, as these attributes were prevalent in their work. Significantly, student writing predominantly demonstrated the characteristics of an informal register.

Knowledge of the register

The findings of this study indicate that student educators demonstrate familiarity with the multiple parameters of register in the English language and the distinct features associated with each register. Furthermore, most students exhibit knowledge of the two primary registers, namely formal and informal. However, their application suggests an inability to differentiate between registers consistently across varied communication contexts. In English, register signifies the level of formality employed when writing and speaking across diverse platforms and occasions. Five fundamental levels delineate various types of register or formality in both written and spoken contexts, serving to enrich linguistic diversity and define formal and informal language.

Table 1: Thematic analysis

	Features of an informal register						
	Contractions	Slang	Lack of parallel structure	Colloquialisms	Passive voice	Personal pronoun	Phrasal verbs
Student 1	2	3	4	5	7	1	1
Student 2	3	1	2	3	4	0	0
Student 3	4	2	0	1	3	0	0
Student 4	6	6	2	3	1	1	2
Student 5	3	4	5	4	1	0	1
Student 6	0	2	1	3	0	0	3
Student 7	2	3	4	2	1	0	2
Student 8	4	5	2	1	0	1	1
Student 9	3	4	5	6	3	1	0
Student 10	2	4	3	2	3	0	0
Student 11	5	0	3	4	1	0	1
Student 12	7	6	5	4	3	2	0
Student 13	3	5	2	5	7	2	2
Student 14	4	0	0	8	4	1	3
Student 15	1	5	4	5	2	1	2

Table 2: The recapitulation of register usage, frequency, and percentages

No.	Register usage	Frequency	Percentage of errors
1	Phrasal verbs	8	10%
2	Lack of parallel structure	10	14%
3	Contractions	12	29%
4	Slang	14	17%
6	Passive voice	9	23%
7	Colloquialism	7	17%

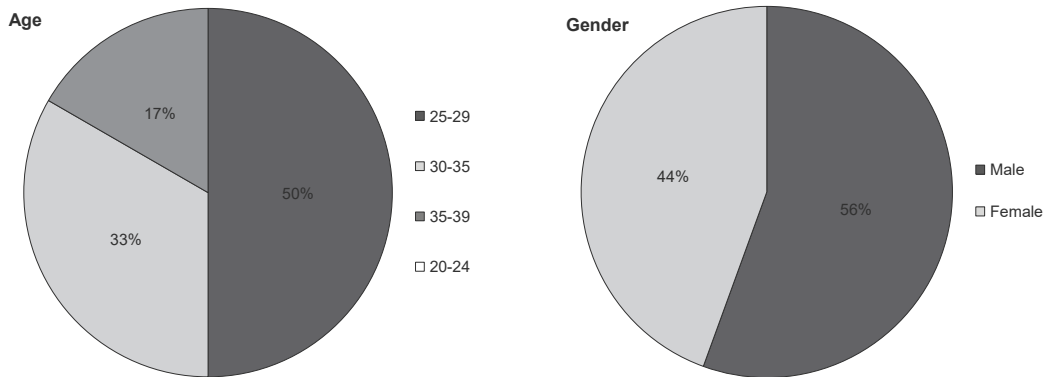


Figure 1: Inappropriate use of register

In addition, each level of language has its own suitable use, which is determined by different situations. This aligns with Alamri and Al-Tunisi's (2019) explanation that the register is an important consideration in higher education institutions due to the complexities of language usage in diverse situations. It would be inappropriate to use casual language and vocabulary that is typically used in speech when writing in an academic setting. Based on their responses, it seems that the students' understanding of language usage for different situations is lacking. This is in accordance with the field-mode-tenor as outlined in the register theory, which addresses the situational parameters for different uses of distinct language varieties.

Analysis of register features

The study findings indicate that students encountered challenges in using appropriate registers for academic writing. Specifically, distinguishing between formal and informal registers poses a significant difficulty. Academic writing necessitates the use of a formal register to establish a sense of detachment between the writer and the reader. Notably, the students' written work exhibited elements that are deemed inappropriate in the context of academic writing.

Passive voice

The examples below indicate the inappropriate use of registers, which is attributed to passive voice in academic writing.

- (1) *The lost bag was **found by the girl** in the white hat.*
- (2) *The movie was **enjoyed by all**.*
- (3) *The decorations for the party were **created by his uncle**.*
- (4) *The phone was left in the car **by the son**.*

The study's findings revealed that four participants made errors involving the use of passive voice, a sentiment echoed in a prior retrospective study by Abkar et al. (2021) that emphasizes the inadequacy of passive voice in academic and professional writing. Passive voice arises when the action's recipient assumes the role of the sentence subject. Such constructions imbue written work with a casual and unimpressive quality. To circumvent the use of passive voice, writers should prioritise commencing sentences with the subject, followed by the verb, and concluding with the object or complement. For instance, '*The lost bag was found by the girl in the white hat*' instead of this fashion. The sentence can simply be presented: '*The girl in the white hat found the lost bag*'. In this type of grammatical syntax, the subject of the sentence is the person, place, or thing that receives the action – normally the object. Academic literacy theory aided in understanding the cause and influences of passive voice in the student's written work. These findings are echoed by Akhtar and Riaz (2019), who asserted the use of active voices in most formal writing.

However, academic writing typically uses active voice, where the subject of the sentence is the person or thing performing the action. Students 12 and 15 made inappropriate use of register in their academic essays attributable to passive voice. The students confused spoken language with written discourse in the sense that the passive voice is permissible in spoken language because it is the most relaxed in nature. The voice of the language writer ought to be active in all the written work to show the seriousness of the information articulated therein. The register theory aided in detecting and analysing the features using the sociolinguistic variation and interaction brought about by the multilingual context.

Contractions

The examples below indicate the use of informal registers in academic writing that are attributed to contractions. The students committed these errors in their pieces of writing.

- (5) *...**can't** be there...*
- (6) *...**haven't** seen him...*
- (7) ***I won't** give up...*
- (8) *...**isn't** the time to go...*
- (9) *...**couldn't** finish the project...*

The study findings indicated that nine participants committed errors that can be attributed to contractions in academic writing. This is consistent with the findings of Sibomana et al. (2019), who dissent from the use of contractions in formal writing. Contractions are not usually used in formal writing, even though they are common in spoken English. In formal writing, one should not use contractions. However, contractions can be used if one is quoting someone's exact words in a piece of writing. Moreover, formal academic writing should use 'cannot' instead of 'can't,' 'have not' instead of 'haven't,' etc.

Students 14, 12, and 15 made the wrong choice of register in their written essays attributable to contractions. The contraction makes the written work appear relaxed, insignificant, and less serious due to these shortened versions of words used. The contractions are quite acceptable in spoken language, but not in written language due to the conversational tone imposed on these words. The students and scholars use these shortened words due to the advent of social media platforms, which have comprised the use of language, and the social media language is quite inclusive of every language aspect. Social media has been a major cause for concern in the students' work, which is validated by Lambani and Nengome's (2017) discussion on the common errors depicted in students' academic essays, which contain contraction, among other mistakes. However, formal writing does not embrace all the elements of the language due to the formal style and tone required for its usage.

Phrasal verbs

The examples below indicate the inappropriate use of registers that are attributable to phrasal verbs.

(10) *The University of Venda* **turned down** his application...

(11) He **put up** the cover...

(12) ...**cash out** the voucher...

(13) We wanted to **find out** what transpired...

(14) Most people **show up** at the event...

(15) He **makes up** a list...

In this study, six participants were found to have used phrasal verbs in their academic writing. This finding aligns with Precarious and Lettiah's (2020) research on inappropriate tone in writing. Phrasal verbs are considered informal and unsuitable for academic writing due to their casual nature. Academic writing should be clear, informative, and concise. Replacing phrasal verbs with single words with clear meanings is important. According to the register theory and academic literacy theory, the field-mode-tenor approach governs the use of certain features in formal written English. Participants 12, 15, and 9 used inappropriate style in their essays due to their use of phrasal verbs, likely stemming from a misunderstanding about their usage in academic writing. Phrasal verbs often have multiple meanings in different contexts, making interpretation complex due to their varied and everyday meanings. This study builds on Maswanganyi et al's (2023) retrospective study on the use of phrasal verbs in other forms of unrestricted writing. A unanimous agreement is that phrasal verbs should be avoided in formal writing.

Abbreviations and acronyms

The examples below indicate the use of the informal register that is attributed to abbreviations and acronyms.

(16) *The flu* is getting worse

(17) **SABC** is in hot water

(18) **HIV** is no longer severe

(19) **UNIVEN** is a good university

(20) **U.S.A.** is my favourite country

The findings of the study revealed that five participants used abbreviations and acronyms without providing detailed descriptions. These findings are consistent with the arguments presented by Mogadid (2021) regarding the use of abbreviations and acronyms in written communication. When using abbreviations or acronyms, it is important to write out the entire name the first time it appears, followed by the acronym. This helps ensure that readers are familiar with the terms being used. For

example, 'University of Venda (UNIVEN)', 'influenza (flu)', 'South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC)', 'human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)', and 'United States of America (USA)' should be written in full when they first appear, after which the abbreviations can be used throughout the text. The results of this study are consistent with those of Delang (2022), who argued that abbreviations and acronyms should be used in consideration of the audience's familiarity and common understanding to ensure precision in conveying abbreviated concepts. Specifically, in their written essays, students 7, 8, and 10 used inappropriate terminology, primarily due to their use of abbreviations and acronyms without providing the full details. The frequent use of unexplained abbreviations has posed a significant challenge in this study, making it difficult for the intended readers to grasp the meaning when the abbreviated terms are unfamiliar.

Colloquialisms

The study found that seven participants made errors in their written work due to their use of colloquial language. This aligns with Mwakapina's (2016) argument against using a colloquial tone in academic writing. Colloquial language is not appropriate in academic writing as it conveys an informal and casual tone. Therefore, students and writers should avoid using colloquial words, and vague terms like 'stuff,' 'lots of,' 'a lot of,' 'really,' 'kind of,' 'thing,' etc. These expressions are acceptable in spoken language and informal writing, but not in formal academic writing.

(21) ...**stuff like that**

(22) **A lot of** food is wasted...

(23) **Things** are getting worse...

(24) **A bit of** understanding...

(25) **Sort of**...

(26) **Lots of** people do not like it

(27) **Really**, this is a great move...

- A bit, slightly, fairly, rather, and somewhat.

- Sort of / kind of – reasonably, relatively, and somewhat.

- Lots of / a lot of – a number, numerous, a significant/considerable number of.

- Really/ very – highly, extremely, exceptionally.

When it comes to writing, it's best to avoid using the above expressions and words because writing should always be self-explanatory. Notably, previous studies' findings align with the current study's findings in relation to the formality scale in formal spoken and written discourse. Mouri (2016) suggested that colloquial language is a deviant feature in a formal register. According to the register theory, register usage is determined by factors such as social occasions, context, purpose, and audience across all communication platforms.

Students 13, 8, and 7 used the wrong register in their written essays attributable to colloquialisms. Social media platforms have indirectly influenced the use of colloquial language in students' work. Most of these words are predominantly used in everyday communication and are confusing to non-native speakers who are directly and indirectly involved in formal writing as they cannot detect where to use which words.

Linking words

The examples below indicate the use of informal registers that are attributable to linking verbs.

(28) **So**, the generation is greatly advancing...

(29) **And** life will get better soon...

(30) **But** not this time

(31) **Also**, I studied computers

(32) **Because** I was angry...

The linking words are used to connect the parts of the sentences and writers do not usually use conjunctions to start sentences when they are writing, but speakers do when they are speaking. With respect to descriptive and prescriptive grammar, there are instances where the usage of initial conjunctions is inappropriate and appropriate depending on the formality of the situation.

The findings of this study indicate that four participants used linking verbs at the beginning of their sentences. From the prescriptive grammar perspective, these conjunctions should not be used at the beginning of the sentence. The findings of this study are consistent with those of Abkar et al. (2021) on the position of transitional words in a sentence. The linking verbs are not acceptable in academic writing. As such, it is recommended that writers and all those involved in academic or professional writing do not begin sentences with words like 'and,' 'so,' 'but,' 'also,' and 'because.'

Using linking words helps one's writing sound scholarly. Linking words aid in maintaining the flow and establishing clear relationships between ideas. These linking words ought to be avoided in all academic and professional writing cases. Furthermore, here are some good transition words and phrases to use in formal writing: additionally, however, in addition, because of, and although. The linking words such as so, but also, and so on are used in the middle of a sentence, not at the beginning of it, and in informal writing. Bodunde and Sotiloye (2013) reported similar observations in their studies, which suggest that transactional words are not one size fits all with the style of writing. Students 1, 4, and 12 used a register in their written work attributable to linking words at the beginning of their sentences. These linking words were used at the beginning of sentences, which are not floating transitional words, and it is ungrammatical to start a sentence with these kinds of words. These transitional words are regularly in both spoken and written language and are mostly used in an inappropriate position to connect different sentences.

Slang

Slang comprises words with multiple meanings that can easily be mistaken for other words. The study's findings revealed that six participants made errors due to the use of slang in academic writing. The current study reaffirmed the research conducted by Sadiq and Khanam (2022) on words that are easily confused with others. The student's work contained slang words such as 'dude,' 'ain't,' 'kid,' 'bail,' 'cram,' 'awesome,' 'fire,' and 'how come.' Table 1 provides examples that can assist writers and students in identifying and eliminating slang from their writing.

Table 3 displays that regional slang can cause confusion for readers outside the specific area and evolves rapidly, potentially losing its impact over time. It is considered unprofessional in written discourse due to its potential for multiple meanings, thus creating confusion for readers. Therefore, when producing professional documents, it is essential to ensure clarity and conciseness and avoid using slang. Students 3, 13, and 14 inaccurately used slang in their written work, affecting the appropriate style. These findings are further supported by Ebotagbo and Anyang (2024), who highlight the potential for slang to be misunderstood due to its multiple meanings and its potential to be confused with other words in written language. Second-language speakers may misunderstand slang as sophisticated English language usage. This misuse of slang is not considered correct English, as the accurate use of these words is unknown.

Lack of parallel structure

The following examples illustrate the use of informal language caused by a lack of parallel structure. In academic writing, lack of parallel structure refers to a grammatical error where a series of words, phrases, or clauses that should be grammatically parallel are not presented in a consistent

Table 3: Slang examples and improvements

Slang: The man was nailed for stealing the car.
Non-slang: The man was convicted of stealing the car.
Slang: I can't handle cramming for tests.
Non-slang: I cannot handle studying for tests at the last minute
Slang: Kids are ill-mannered hey
Non-slang: Children are ill-mannered these days
Dudes are messing up in this generation
Non-slang: Men are living a careless life

manner. This element, also known as parallelism, ensures that similar ideas or items in a sentence or paragraph are presented balanced and consistently. Maintaining parallel structure in academic writing is crucial because it enhances clarity, readability, and the overall flow of the text. A lack of parallel structure can confuse readers and diminish the message's impact.

(33) *I like to Jog and **walking**.*

(34) *He is smart, honest, and **having a great sense of responsibility**.*

(35) *I like both to read books and **watching** movies.*

(36) *{!} Enjoy going out to a movie as much as **I like to rent a movie and staying home to watch it**.*

(37) *Many people maintain a healthy diet because they want to look healthy, **increasing their energy**, and because they want to live longer.*

The study's findings revealed that three participants made errors attributable to a lack of parallel structure. These findings support Al Hamdany's (2015) argument about the unequal function of phrases. Additionally, this work may contribute to a better understanding of identifying the lack of parallel structure in written discourse among language users. For the first time, it has been demonstrated that there exists a disparity in the use of words or phrases with unequal functions in terms of grammatical construction.

These findings align with Nazareno's (2019) research, which suggests that grammatical constructions in phrases and sentences carry equal weight and function for each word. The sentences above showcase the unequal forms of words and functions, indicating a lack of parallelism. Furthermore, words, phrases, and clauses connected by comparative expressions (such as "as much as," "more than," and "less than") need to have parallel grammatical constructions, ensuring that all elements carry equal weight and follow the same structure. Students 1, 4, and 6 used register incorrectly in their written work due to a lack of parallel structure. Parallelism is an important aspect of language usage as it ensures that words and phrases in a piece of writing have equal grammatical weight. This contrasts with the findings of Akinyeye (2015), who suggests that parallelism is a significant challenge requiring meticulous attention in acquiring and mastering English language rules. The use of words in English can pose a major challenge due to grammatical and syntax rule exceptions, particularly in sentence construction and forms of words used in the passive voice. Each level of language use is appropriate based on differing situations. Using language and vocabulary reserved for speaking when writing in the classroom would be inappropriate. Based on their responses, the students' understanding of register usage seems insufficient.

Conclusion

The findings of this study have brought significant clarity to the understanding of register variation and appropriate usage. In academic writing, register competence encompasses the ability to employ the appropriate language, tone, style, and formality expected in a specific academic context or discipline. Different academic disciplines and contexts may exhibit varying registers, which are specific varieties or language styles suitable for situations. The register utilised in a research paper would vary from that used in a philosophical essay. Register competence necessitates a writer's understanding of the target audience, purpose, and expectations of the academic community they are addressing. This research has effectively addressed this gap by underscoring the significance of register usage in different channels of communication. The crux of the matter is that register is utilised in all forms of communication, including written and spoken, depending on grammar, syntax, and tone. Additionally, registers may be quite rigid, making it quite challenging for English students to discern which one to employ. Analysis of student responses reveals that the majority are only familiar with formal and informal registers, while there are five distinct registers. Moreover, students struggle to differentiate the use of registers in both spoken and written language due to an incomplete grasp of the rules and usage of different registers. In addition, formal and informal language features seem familiar to them. However, the right application in content tends to be contradictory and inappropriate usage. The students have limited understanding of the concepts, significance, and suitable usage of register and its differences, although it appears to be difficult to use based on the students' responses. This study builds on and contributes to work in academic

writing and register usage and addresses mistakes and misconceptions. Subsequently, this is a significant area of research because formal and informal varieties are still causing some debates in the research communities and second language contexts. Many studies appear to have neglected this issue, and second language speakers' exposure to different modes of communication continues to cause language endangerment. Several questions remain to be addressed, such as whether the use of contractions, colloquialisms, and slang in television programmes is acceptable in written and formal discourses. However, some key aspects of register competence in academic writing include formality, technical vocabulary, style and organization, audience awareness, clarity, and precision. Academic writing typically requires a formal tone and language, and writers should use precise vocabulary, avoid slang or colloquial expressions, and adhere to standard grammar and punctuation rules. Writers should consider their target audience's knowledge level and expertise, and academic writing should strive for clarity of expression and logical coherence.

The interaction and variation in a multilingual context for standard English requires different varieties of the English language based on geographical location. Therefore, English worldwide is not in a sociolinguistic vacuum, but in contact with multiple languages in various regions throughout the world. Field, mode, and tenor elements assist in text analysis and writing based on the situation, audience, and purpose.

To improve writing skills in academic contexts, reading extensively in the chosen field, studying academic writing guides and resources, and seeking feedback from experts and peers experienced in the specific discipline are important. Regular practice and revision will help refine one's writing skills and improve the ability to use the appropriate register for academic texts.

Recommendations

This study analysed the use of registers by third-level students who majored in English as a second language. We recommend the following:

- To effectively prepare student educators to teach L2 learners, it is essential to implement corrective and intervention measures to enhance their competence in the target language. Student educators should refer to academic writing books to thoroughly understand register usage and its rules to achieve this. Furthermore, it is important to engage the Department of English lecturers in addressing and assisting students in rectifying habits leading to improper use of registers in academic writing. It is recommended that remedial work be provided focusing on the proper use of registers to reduce the high percentage of inaccuracies in this area. Academic writing requires careful attention to English communication skills so that students can master the appropriate writing style and register usage. The differences in register usage in spoken and written language should be emphasized when teaching the English language. Student educators need to be given more time for English tutorials. The curriculum should include register usage at an early stage of teaching the module to give students enough time to master the concepts and appropriate use.
- Future research should build on the findings of this study by further investigating the challenges and complexities associated with the changing use of language styles on communication platforms. Future studies should also focus on the entire first-level student population to understand their external influences and implement effective strategies to address them, as the current studies only focused on third-level students. Additionally, it would be beneficial to examine the use of the English language register among students who do not regularly use it in their daily lives. Future research should replicate the same research problem in a new context and location to determine if there are variations in the results. Future studies should also address the limitations of this research regarding other unexplored domains. Prospective researchers should review and expand upon the theoretical framework outlined in the current study.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

I am Innocent Zitha, a postgraduate student currently enrolled in the Department of English for a Master of Arts in English at the University of Venda. I am at the stage of data collection in my research entitled - **Register Competence in Academic Writing: A Case Study of Selected third-year Level English Students at a Rural University.**

I would like to request that you take about 20 minutes of your time to respond to the questionnaire. Your participation is of paramount importance since the researcher has chosen this group to solicit data on the register competence of students.

Have you ever heard of Register?

1. yes	2. no
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How many registers do you know in the English language?

1. five	2. four	3. three	4. two
---------	---------	----------	--------

How often do you pay attention to your register in academic writing?

Sometimes	Always	Never	Rarely	Uncertain	Unconscious
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Which register do you use in your academic writing?

.....
.....
.....

What features of the register do you consider when writing assignments?

.....
.....
.....

How do you inspect the appropriateness of the register in written work?

.....
.....
.....

What aspects of spoken language do you avoid in academic writing?

.....
.....
.....

APPENDIX B: SUMMARY OF TRANSCRIPTIONS

Have you ever heard of register in English language?

- Participant 1: No
- Participant 2: No
- Participant 3: Yes
- Participant 4: Yes
- Participant 5: Yes
- Participant 6: yes
- Participant 7: yes
- Participant 8: yes
- Participant 9: yes
- Participant 10: yes
- Participant 11: yes

Participant 12: yes

Participant 13: yes

Participant 14: yes

Participant 15: yes

How many registers do you know in the English language?

Participant 1: two

Participant 2: one

Participant 3: three

Participant 4: two

Participant 5: two

Participant 6: two

Participant 7: two

Participant 8: one

Participant 9: three

Participant 10: three

Participant 11: three

Participant 12: two

Participant 13: one

Participant 14: two

Participant 15: two

How often do you care about the register usage?

Participant 1: sometimes

Participant 2: once in a while

Participant 3: always

Participant 4: never

Participant 5: always

Participant 6: sometimes

Participant 7: never

Participant 8: sometimes

Participant 9: once in a while

Participant 10: never

Participant 11: always

Participant 12: sometimes

Participant 13: once in a while

Participant 14: always

Participant 15: never

Which register do you use in your academic writing?

Participant 1: Formal

Participant 2: academic register

Participant 3: acceptable format

Participant 4: formal

Participant 5: formal

Participant 6: English language register

Participant 7: formal

Participant 8: formal

Participant 9: formal

Participant 10: formal

Participant 11: Acceptable format

Participant 12: Accurate register

Participant 13: Appropriate register

Participant 14: formal

Participant 15: formal

What features do you use to decide the appropriate usage of register in your discourse?

Participant 1: contractions and slangs in academic writing

Participant 2: Avoidance of the use of phrasal verbs in written work

Participant 3: I do not use personal pronouns in formal writing.

Participant 4: I do not use idiomatic and ambiguous statements in my writings.

Participant 5: I do not believe that the clichés and idioms should be in formal writing.

Participant 6: I often inspect the length of my paragraph responses in the essay.

Participant 7: The use of passive voices

Participant 8: Using contractions.

Participant 9: Avoid using colloquial language.

Participant 10: Use of double negation

Participant 11: Use of casual words

Participant 12: Use of non-standard vocabulary

Participant 13: Presence of incomplete sentences

Participant 14: Use of phrasal verbs in a piece of writing